

# Medicine, Meditation, and Osler's Aequanimitas

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## Abstract

*In this era of near-chaotic changing medical practice, it seems well to reflect on the past standard-bearers of our profession, our present state of mind and morale, and develop new emotional techniques and values suited to our challenges.*

I hesitate to talk to fellow physicians about the philosophy of medicine as I am neither a philosopher nor a paragon. The things I will say will be more confession than counsel. And with this audience, I am addressing a group of colleagues who I respect as one of the best hospital staffs I have ever known. That said, I plan to share some thoughts about medicine and its future that have found their way into the butterfly net I hold up to the winds of change to furnish ideas for my jottings.

We are at a difficult time. The golden age of medicine is probably behind us, and may already have started to fade in the days of Osler, who is one of the subjects of this talk. The burdens of malpractice suits, of managed medical care, of excess competition, of decreasing pay, of increasing bureaucracy and heavy-handed oversight were not faced by Osler. And, indeed, they scarcely dimmed my father's optimistic smile fifty years later, in mid century. But they are now fully upon us, increasing in weight, and suffocating the joy that has previously suffused our glorious profession.

Again personally, I have not been immune to this negative shift. I too have been increasingly depressed by the transition from self-motivation to outside control by the unworthy, the materialistic, and the ill-informed. It has been so disheartening for me that, on two occasions, I fled the storms of practice for the calmer waters of teaching and writing. My sanity required it. Again, I am no paragon, as flawed as any. Yet perhaps my struggles can inform your struggles, my history can smooth your path.

I find my personal standards slipping. The other three surgeons in my family would be disappointed when I say, or even wish, that a troublesome patient would go away. I jokingly tell my nurse, "I'd like to think of her as your patient," when faced with such an irritant. But, truth be told, the winning over of such a crusty client can be a personal triumph of gratifying dimensions, and a lesson in our own imperfections.

So how do we deal with all this. How do we develop the unperturbability and equanimity Sir William Osler so much valued in the seasoned physician? Let me set the stage by quoting from his famous address to the graduating medical school class of 1889 at The University of Pennsylvania.

*"In the first place, in the physician or surgeon no quality takes rank with imperturbability...Imperturbability means coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, clearness of judgment in moments of grave peril, immobility, impassiveness...In the second place, there is a mental equivalent to this bodily endowment, which is as important in our pilgrimage as imperturbability...-a calm equanimity is the desirable attitude. How difficult to attain, yet how necessary, in success as in failure!"*

*A distressing feature in the life which you are about to enter, a feature which will press hardly upon the finer spirits among you and ruffle their equanimity, is the uncertainty which pertains not alone to our science and art, but to the very hopes and fears which make us men. In seeking absolute truth we aim at the unattainable, and must be content with finding broken portions.... Engrossed late and soon in professional cares, getting and spending, you may so lay waste your powers that you may find, too late, with hearts given away, that there is no place in your habit-stricken souls for those gentler influences which make life worth living"*

There is much more quotable here, but let us take only this one inspiration, store it away, to revisit in a few moments.

I'd like to make one more quote, not exactly about equanimity, but about the attitude we might assume when faced with personal anguish and uncertainty. I was fortunate in college to have a religion professor who later became a close friend. His name was Malcolm Diamond, and he was one of the professors whose lecture halls were always filled. One day, when we were having lunch together, I asked him, among all the scriptures he knew by heart, what passage gave him most comfort when facing a crisis. He answered me, not from the Torah, the Koran, the Bible, or the Bagevad Gita, but from "Lord Jim," by Joseph Conrad. The passage is from the middle of the text, and is repeated with slight variation a few pages later. Stein is talking to Marlow, and both are in a philosophic frame of mind.

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*"A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out, as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns---nicht wahr...No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself; and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up."*

The point of Conrad's metaphor, then, is to have an attitude that does not run away from problems, but rather enters them, works on them with knowledge, intelligence and courage. But let us now turn from an attitudinal point of view to a more physiological, anatomic, and practical approach to the mind and spirit.

Much has been learned about the mind in the past 100 years and its links to the endocrine and even the immune system. Herbert Benson at Harvard has proven the benefits of meditation in controlling, not only catecholamines and blood pressure, but brain waves themselves. Religion, or at least some religious practices, has thus become a legitimate bed-fellow of science. Einstein remarked that "Religion without Science is blind, but Science without Religion is lame." The practice of meditation has been mimicked by other stress-relieving techniques: the great Frank Leahy would frequently step back from the operating table, sit down with gloved hands before him, and meditate when faced with a surgical conundrum. I myself used to turn away and splash my hands in the scrub-bucket in times of surgical uncertainty, so much so that my scrub nurses would occasionally grace my bucket with a sterile rubber ducky!

Scientific investigation has shown that meditation, beside being a practice going back thousands of years and followed in nearly all known religions, can give more rest than sleep itself. And we find it provides sharper focus of the intellect and greater control over that pesky monkey -mind that bends our attention to elephants when we want to think of something else; that mental noise that repeats parental put-downs on endless tapes of the super-ego. It seems the older we get, the more our thoughts turn to past and future. And the more we need the living-in-the-moment which meditation provides. The newest proponent of this idea is Eckhart Tolle in his best selling, *"The Power of Now"*. Now is the only moment over which we have absolute control. The past has already slipped from our grasp, and is, for most of us, about eighty percent regret; the future becomes increasingly uncertain as we age, also about eighty percent anxiety. Joy is possible only in the NOW. Tolle has westernized this eastern wisdom represented by Thich Nat Hahn and Eknath Easwaran; Jon Kabat Zinn has put it into practice. As Jerry Jampolsky says, forgiveness is the greatest healer of all. And he quotes a patient: "forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better past." Now, once again, is the operative moment, the only one we can control, for better or worse.

This is not to assert that meditation can be practiced only by sitting quietly, eyes closed, in the lotus position with running water gurgling at your side. No, as the sage tells it, meditation can also be in chopping wood and carrying water. Or in making tea. Or in paddling a boat. Or in delighting in a glorious sunset. Or on hearing captivating music. Or in watching the glistening, marching waves. Or even in tracing the fine trajectory of a golf ball destined for an eagle putt. I used to calm when entering the operating room, knowing I had a completely absorbing task in front of me and no possibility of being disturbed while doing it. And as you golfers might agree, if you start to think of past or future on the golf course, you've blown the game.

So meditation, meditation of all sizes, varieties, origins, can be a superb stress-reliever, taking us miles from the petty and not-so-petty demands of our profession. I commend it to you.

And yet, we badly need more than stress-relief. In this time of rapid change and near-chaos, we also need standards, values, and motives that will stand up to this time and make possible a future with an ethos not superficially based on six-month accountant's figures. Our Western civilization has been shaken, not only by contact with a non-compliant middle East, but also by a challenging Rising Sun and a materialistic television-based life style. Our parochialism is Greek, or Latin, to our new neighbors and new kinsmen from around the world. So where is the moral Pole star that is True North from any ethical position on the globe?

I reconsider the values of my own Judeo-Christian tradition. They retain some validity for me, but I find them wanting as expressions of clear vision and "purity of heart," to use Kierkegaard's phrase. If we take the Ten Commandments, for example, and study them for relevance, we find most of them wanting. On a day by day basis, I'm not usually found coveting my neighbor's wife. At least not in my advancing age, wisdom, and satisfaction with my own marriage. Nor am I tempted to kill or steal - it's not fashionable. As far as honoring my father and mother, they've been dead for half my lifetime now. Or the golden rule, "do unto others." There are many times when I think ill of myself, when I put myself down. Should I do that also to my neighbor? Or how about self hate to the point of suicide. Is that justification for killing the other? Martin Buber stated truth here, with his "I and Thou." No. I find western civilization and philosophy lacking in what I choose to label "useful imperatives," or moral guides that are helpful day by day in our relations with family, friends, patients and colleagues.

The Buddha has provided four such "useful imperatives." They are known collectively as "The Four Sublime or Excellent States." And they are as follows;

### **Loving kindness**

### **Shared Joy**

### **Shared Sorrow**

### **Equanimity**

And here we revisit Osler's ideal! I don't know to what extent Sir William was a student of Eastern Philosophy, but it seems he was on the same path. With regard to the other three imperatives, Lovingkindness is certainly an attitude which any humanist understands and can embrace, as are Shared Joy, (rejoicing in the happiness of others) and Shared Sorrow, or empathy. I commend these excellent states to you as personal goals which cannot be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or faulted. They are truly Sublime, altogether worthy of our attention, whether in the twenty-first century practice of medicine or in the by-ways of life and family.

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